The Importance of a Small University

On a Thursday in April a group of approximately 150 students, faculty, staff, and family members gathered in the Regents Commons of the Shaw Center at Hillyer College to celebrate the life of Frank Dello Iacono, who passed away this past February. Frank had been a math faculty member in Hillyer for the past 20 years and a part-time statistics faculty member in the Department of Economics, Finance, and Insurance in the Barney School of Business for 10 years before that, during which time he also was employed by United Technologies Corporation (UTC).

Frank was a very visible figure on campus—a small, dapper man who usually dressed in a sport coat, a pair of casual slacks, and white running shoes. I knew him to be an involved and popular teacher in Hillyer, so I was not surprised by the large turnout of students and colleagues who came to honor him. But what I heard that day not only honored him but also revealed to me, in the most concrete and moving way, why a University of Hartford education is so valuable.

Dean David Goldenberg, who was resplendent in white running shoes for the occasion, had organized a great lineup of speakers—colleagues, students, and family members who all remembered Frank in their own ways. During my turn I remembered Frank’s beating me to Harry Gray with requests for funds. Frank had made a connection with Harry during his time at UTC, and the two men shared a deep interest in improving students’ math skills through information technology. When Frank knew he needed a new lab or new software, he told me and then went to Harry despite my continually asking him not to.

Sure enough, when I went to my next scheduled meeting with Harry and began to discuss our needs in math, Harry would stop me: “Frank has already been here,” he would smile. And sure enough, when Harry made his next series of gifts to the University, there would be a gift to math education in Hillyer.

Frank’s last request (this time I did get a chance to help frame the approach) was to establish a pilot program for what has now grown into our successful Summer Bridge program for entering University students.

Every speaker had similar stories. Frank’s colleagues told lovely and moving stories of his daily small acts of thoughtfulness. His granddaughters, Katie and Gabby, told loving stories of Frank taking them for walks and for ice cream. Like their grandfather’s faculty colleagues, they focused on the everyday acts of kindness that defined him so clearly.

But, to me at least, the most moving comments came from his students. Three of them—Jessica Musto A’16; Melissa Rubackin A’13, ’15; and Sherice Forde A’14—told of their relationships with Frank, and two others—Samrana Bertrand A’14 and Chelsea Natal A’14—presented a video tribute to him. Each in her own way, these five students talked about Frank’s ability to help them overcome their past challenges with math and his way of supporting and challenging them to succeed. Each of them had a strong personal connection to Frank.

The most memorable moment for me came during Melissa’s comments. She was describing how Frank (touchingly, she called him Dello) gave her bananas to get through the day, when she broke down into tears. We all waited patiently. At just the right moment, Sherice got up, walked over to her, and put her arm around her, remaining there until Melissa composed herself and finished her comments.

The moment was so emotionally perfect: one student silently supporting another while the other student poured out her soul. I have never seen anything like it.

Later, when Frank Dello Iacono, Frank’s son, concluded the remembrance, he commented: “I went to a large university. I never knew my professors personally. Now I know why it is so important to attend a small university.”

I couldn’t have said it better.

Walter Harrison
President